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# All About Leaks

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 21 — The anonymous passing of information from Government to journalist, or what is sometimes called "the leak," may be the most misunderstood activity in the pursuit of power and policy-making.

It occurs not only at the top of Government, or only by dissidents, by left-wingers or right-wingers, or by legislators, as opposed to Administration officials.

It is not merely a weapon in internal policy debates, or just informational, or principally gossip.

It is not simply something officials give to reporters or something reporters dig out on their own.

It is not only knowledge that would damage the national interest or an official's reputation, or enlighten and advance the people's right to know.

"The leak" is all these and more.

The practice is taking on significance once again as the Reagan Administration tries to crack down by carrying out lie-detector tests and dismissing those in the Administration suspected of such disclosures. And as William J. Casey, Director of Central Intelligence, is threatening news organizations with prosecution under espionage laws for publishing secret data given out on communications intelligence or intercepts.

This subject "gets way oversimplified," said Robert J. McCloskey, who served as the State Department spokesman far longer than anyone else, from 1964 to 1973, then again in an informal capacity from 1974 to 1976. "There is a lack of understanding in and out of Government on how the news process works in Washington," he added.

### No Agreement on Definition

There is not even agreement on a definition. The narrow and commonly understood definition of a leak is a deliberate planting of information in the press that is against established Administration policy. Given the fact that a good deal of each day's news is based on unnamed sources and officials, is a leak then everything other than Government handouts, statements, news conferences and the like?

Or is it really the passing of sensitive information that officials what to keep secret, for whatever reasons? Who is to say whether these reasons are valid? Who in the executive branch might have approved the leak? And if it came from someone as high as the Secretary of State, was the President aware of the leaker?

The trouble for the public and the problem for Government officials not involved in the leak is figuring out what is going on.

Take the front page of today's New York Times, which does not begin to exhaust the various permutations and combinations of leaks.

## Syria and Terrorism

According to unnamed American officials, the sole terrorist survivor of the Rome airport bombing last December told Italian officials that Syrian agents planned and aided in the plot, contrary to belief that the terrorist had been operating only under orders from Libya.

Officials at neither the top or bottom of the Reagan Administration wanted this information made public. They feared that the reaction would bring pressure to take strong action against Syria at a time when the Administration has not begun to make up its mind about responding if in fact Syria is deeply involved in terrorism.

Speculation around Washington today was that the article probably originated with the Israelis or friends of Israel in the Federal Government with an interest in turning public opinion against Syria. In fact, the initial tip on the story came from an American official who is in no way involved with policy toward Syria.

The tip came in response to a half-joking request by the reporter for a lead into a good story, any good story. Israeli officials were asked but said they had no knowledge of the terrorist's statement to Italians. Administration officials then confirmed the tip, and some even added details. They did so in the hope of shaping the story to reflect their position: That while the testimony of the terrorist contributed to the growing evidence of Syrian complicity in international terrorism, it was in no way "conclusive" about Syrian involvement in terrorism.

## Envoy's Resignation

William A. Wilson, the United States Ambassador to the Vatican, resigned, and the Administration offered no explanation other than saying that he wanted to return to private life in California.

But unnamed Administration officials told The Times that their senior colleagues had been warning President Reagan for months that Mr. Wilson's diplomatic free-lancing and private business activities would lead to nothing but trouble for the White House. Times reporters had been working for weeks to follow up tips that Mr. Wilson had had private connections and dealings with the Libyans in the face of policy not to do so.

The information for today's article was provided by people in and out of Government who were unhappy about Mr. Wilson and wanted to bring about his resignation. To them, the story was an instrument.

## Saudi Arms Deal

The White House announced that Mr. Reagan would no longer ask Congress to approve the sale of portable antiaircraft missiles to Saudi Arabia. The portable missle was the most disputed part of the arms package, and the White House was clearly hoping that its elimination just might be enough to overcome an overwhelming majority in Congress opposed to the sale. (Mr. Reagan today vetoed Congress's resolution disapproving the sale.)

The rest of the story embodied, typically, comments from unnamed White House officials. These were high-level officials who wanted to put the best face on the decision. These officials also passed on thoughts about their strategy for dealing with Congress.

Except for the comments on strategy, the background information and explanation of the decision were undoubtedly made at senior levels, and the unnamed officials were "leaking" with top-level authorization.

Beyond these examples, past and present Government officials have their own problems dealing with leaks and leakers.

John Hughes, who was the first spokesman for Secretary of State George P. Shultz, said he "could not think of a single instance where Shultz asked me to leak."

But he remembered all too well the 1984 story about highly classified intelligence reports that an East European ship might be headed toward Nicaragua loaded with advanced fighter aircraft of the kind the United States had said it would not tolerate in the possession of the Sandinistas. The Central Intelligence Agency could not be sure of the cargo or its destination. "But on the eve of the Presidential election, someone in the White House leaked to CBS that we knew" that the cargo included the prohibited jets and the destination to be Nicaragua, Mr. Hughes continued. Indeed, the ship stopped in Nicaragua, but no jets were on board.

"My suspicion was that someone in the White House with an axe to grind wanted to make it sound as if Nicaragua was being more daring than it was, and that someone was also trying to create a strong Administration reaction," recalled Mr. Hughes, now a columnist for The Christian Science Monitor.

Mr. McCloskey, the former State Department spokesman, now a counselor at Catholic Relief Services, recollected his own travails with Henry A. Kissinger's propensity to provide information to reporters on an unnamed basis.

Mr. Kissinger was known for such one-to-one arrangements when he was national security adviser, and "maybe it was mutally advantageous," Mr. McCloskey said.

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But "when Henry became Secretary of State, I recommended that he deal with the press as a whole, not individually," he added. "He didn't agree and went on seeing people individually."

Officials in the Nixon White House did not take such a detached view of Mr. Kissinger's "individual" contacts with reporters, much of which they contended was directed against them.

The current batch of disclosures causing so much consternation in the Reagan Administration concerns two things: the reputed passing of sensitive communications intelligence by an American to the Soviet Union, and the interception of messages between Libya and its diplomatic posts overseas prior to and just after the terrorist bombing of a West Berlin discothèque.

Larry Speakes, the White House spokesman, was asked today why news articles about the secrets reportedly already given to Moscow were more damaging to national security than Mr. Reagan's own public statement about the United States intercepting the Libyan messages.

Mr. Speakes responded: "The scope and the impact of it is entirely different. Also, the fact that it was a carefully considered decision here to release the Libyan information, what of it we did, and it was a judgmental call that we made to declassify that information."

But, a reporter persisted, was not the C.I.A. concerned about the decision to release the Libyan information?

"Well, I think those type of discussions were held," Mr. Speakes responded. "But the final determination was that it was in the national interest to provide the information to the public."

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